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Media Coverage and Audience Awareness of Prison Reform Campaigns in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract: The study investigated the extent to which the media have set the agenda for the reformation of prison, which has since August 2019 been renamed “correctional services” in Nigeria, and the corresponding level of awareness among media audience in South-East Nigeria. Survey and content analysis were the research methods adopted. For the survey, 240 subjects were purposively chosen from a cluster of two groups. In contrast, 56 randomly chosen program schedules of broadcast media and 28 issues of select newspapers for February 2017 and February 2018 were content-analyzed. Interviews were also conducted. The study revealed inadequate media coverage of the reforms and a low level of awareness among respondents. It recommended, among others, that the World Prisons’ Awareness Day held annually on February 11 should be popularized to ensure increased awareness by both the media and their audience.

Keywords: Audience awareness, campaigns, correctional service, media coverage, prisons, social change

Introduction

The mass media are generally seen as special mobilizers or change agents. Their primary product, communication, is seen as “perhaps, the most instrumental source of change in our society today” (Wilson, 1997, p.15). With the media, the world has witnessed unprecedented revolutionary changes in education, economics, politics, and society. Wilson (1997) sees social change as any perceptible modification in a person’s attitude or behavior or even that of a society arising from a new communication and other experiences. He observes that such a change can also be imperceptible where its total effects may occur over time. In other words, social change is a necessity in most societies, especially developing ones such as Nigeria. It is a deliberate attempt to change people’s world view, attitudes, and behaviors to achieve a society of right-thinking and right-behaving citizens. Social change is, therefore, an imperative for societies that clamor for stability and progress.

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In Nigeria, notable social, health, economic and attitudinal changes and mobilization have been carried out through the mass media. Radio and television, with their visual and auditory appeals and ability to reach far-flung areas to enlighten both the literate and illiterate citizens, have been at the forefront in government's attempt to bring about social change. Their programs have been used throughout the country to evoke in the citizens the feeling of patriotism and reawaken among them the zeal to participate in development efforts (Nwagbara, Okon, Nweke, & Okugo, 2018; Okinda, Nyambuga, & Ojwang, 2020). Newspapers, too, with their ability to present news and other information to a broad spectrum of the society in an inexpensive, convenient, and portable format, have not been left out in this effort.

Nigeria is still a society evolving from ancient to modern, from rural to urban, and from dictatorial to democratic systems. These and even more are reasons Nigeria needs social change. One very vital social system or institution that requires massive change is the prisons or correctional services. The Nigerian prison system was established to administer penal treatment to adult offenders, help to reduce crime in the society, and manage criminals in prison yards. As contained in the Prisons Training Manual (2010), its operatives are to keep convicted offenders in safe custody; keep awaiting-trial inmates in custody until law courts ask for them; punish offenders as instructed by law courts, and rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners who have completed their sentences.

However, rather than satisfactorily carrying out these functions, the Nigerian prison system has become a subject of controversy. Instead of serving as a rehabilitation home, it has become a training ground for hardened criminals (Obioha, 1995). Its conditions have remained poor and dilapidated, which has denied it of the very needful roles of building and rebuilding Nigerian citizens and reintegrating remolded law offenders back into the society (Rahaman, 2010; Eze, 2010; Chukwudi, 2012). Due to these lapses, there has, therefore, been the need for a total reform of the Nigerian prison system. Such reform requires continuous social mobilization – mobilizing policymakers to come up with policies geared towards positive changes, as well as the citizens to accept and cooperate with the government in realizing the reform agenda. This mobilization falls within the social functions of the mass media, through agenda setting and/or framing for the expected reform.

To what extent, therefore, have the Nigerian media contributed to the prison reforms? Are they able to set the agenda for the reforms? Is there a corresponding awareness of the audience on the reforms? These are the primary ingredients of this paper.

Literature Review

Problems and Rationale for Reform of the Nigerian Prison System

Chukwudi (2012) maintains that the "Nigerian prisons are characterized by so many problems which have been indicated by several studies, and this has been reasons for inadequacies of the system as a corrective institution" (p.38). Obioha (1995) more clearly opines that "life in a Nigerian prison, in general, is overly regimented to the extent that there is a strict control in virtually all activities of the inmates" (p.41). This often leaves the prisoners in a mentally brutalized manner with broken body and spirits which destroy the individual.

Studies by Obioha (1995), Adetula and Fatusin (2010), and Ckukwudi, Marumo, and Mothelesi (2019) confirm that contact with prison institutions in Nigeria makes the less-hardened individuals more hardened upon release. According to Adetula and Fatusin (2010), the longer an offender stays in prison, the more the probability of recidivism could be traced and vice versa. The fundamental cause of the post-release problem of maladjustment and recidivism can be traced to the lockup pattern and content of the prison system. As for Ckukwudi, Marumo, and Mothelesi (2019), their study on prison administration shows that it stimulates prisoners' and ex-convicts' involvement in crime (98%), and their criminal behavior mostly makes humans and the society insecure (93%).

In most Nigerian prisons, the remand and convict populations – the young and old inmates – are not systematically sorted out in different cells according to the Standard Minimum Rule (SMR) for imprisonment; and there is overcrowding, which has been put at 74.19% (Obioha, 1995). Though a study by Igbinovia and Omoroghiunwa (2019) identifies the rehabilitation programs in Benin City prisons as social intervention services with the highest mean value of 2.92 (70%), skills acquisition programs 2.76 (69%), recreational programs 2.66 (66.5%), and educational services 2.51 (62.8%); the general story in the Nigerian prison system tells of human resources being wasted due to idleness among inmates because the old-time trade ideas and occupations have been abandoned (Chukwudi, 2012); decay of social infrastructures such as recreational facilities and poor environmental conditions, which have been described as “uncheerful” (Oyetade, 2003), “dehumanizing” (Soyinka, 1992), and a “hell” (Abubakar, 2001); inadequate funding which is the bane of all public institutions in Nigeria; low staff morale arising from poor remunerations; denying prisoners of their rights to food, clean environment, and human dignity; and non-consideration of other alternatives to imprisonment. Also, in many Nigerian prisons, inmates sleep two to three on a bed or the floor of filthy cells. Toilets are blocked, overflowing, or simply non-existent, and there is usually no running water. Some prisons have small clinics that lack medications. Guards often demand bribe from inmates for such privileges as attending hospitals, receiving visitors, contacting their families, and in some cases, being allowed outside their cells.

Indeed, the Nigerian prison system is more punitive and dehumanizing than the supposed corrective role it is supposed to play in line with international conventions and protocols on human rights, which the country is a signatory to. One such convention is the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners, which Nigeria has roundly failed to embrace. That is why there is a serious need for significant and consistent prison reforms in Nigeria.

Efforts to reform the Nigerian prison system began in 2000 and took a definite form in June 2001 when the government proposed to review the existing Prison Law and reform the system. Many committees and groups were formed at various instances, and their tasks focused on all or at least one of these pressing areas – congestion and overcrowding, physical infrastructural facilities, treatment of inmates, logistics and transportation system, and skills development. A lot of money, according to Chukwudi (2012), has been invested in these, yet serious reformation has not taken place. The only known achievement so far is the Nigerian Correctional Services Bill passed by the legislature and assented to by President Muhammadu Buhari on August 14, 2019, with the clear aims of addressing issues not covered in the repealed Prison Act 2004 and improving prison administration in Nigeria.

Mass Media as Social Mobilizer

Nnoli (1987) paints a picture of the mass media as social mobilizers. He observes that “the media provide a consistent picture of the social world which may lead the audience to adopt the media version of social reality; a reality of facts and norms, values and expectations” (p.9). Mboho (2005) agrees that the media are “a powerful tool for social re-engineering, re-initialization, and mobilization. The media have the power to ‘sell’ ideas, views, and even ‘needs’ to society. Once it is carried in the media, it attracts social attention and possible action...” (p.71). This is confirmed in a study by Okon and Ikpi (2019), which reveals that as a result of sensitization campaigns carried out through channels, including the mass media, residents in the Ugep community of Cross River State, Nigeria were successfully mobilized against engaging “in the act of defecating in the open” (p. 100).

According to Nana (2005), the media exist to inform, educate, entertain, socialize, mobilize, chronicle history, persuade, set agenda, confer status, and can direct victims – recipients of messages to adopt the media version of reality. The media can re-enforce certain social beliefs. They can make or mar. Lazardfield (1984) notes that “the media by their very mention of people or even issues, confer importance of them in the public eye” (p.95). With the advent of digital media, audiences are getting better informed. However, the dynamic nature of digital media, the tastes, and preferences of utilizing media, has undergone major changes along with demographic patterns (Barbakov, Vinogradova, & Shatsky, 2018).

McBride (1980) opines that there is no doubt the mass media (press, radio, and television) do have a capacity not only to reflect but also to shape opinion and to play a part in forming attitudes. In the past, the communication system was seen as an isolated phenomenon within society, related practically to technology, divorced more or less from other aspects of society. Its place in the political system, its convergence with social structures, and its dependence upon cultural life were seldom given adequate process. Today, it is much more widely recognized as a social process to be studied from every angle, not in isolation but in an inclusive social context. In the modern world, however, awareness of these interlinks has become more widespread than ever before.

Generally, mass communication facilitates social change (Mboho, 2005; Okon, 2018). Change is inevitable; society needs mechanisms for accomplishing it peacefully. The mass media act as agents of socialization, the process by which human beings learn the extraordinary complex interpersonal rituals and the value systems of their own culture. According to Head (1992), “in the past, the child learned this behavior from parents, peer group, formal education, and rituals of initiation. Now, the media generally, and television especially, also share in this function.” Elshahed (2020), working specifically on “social media mobilization and political activism in Egypt,” concludes that the media have enabled and given power/voice to the powerless, thus mobilizing them for political action and activism. Mboho (2005) succinctly captures the social roles of the mass media as follows. In the interest of the people and the nation, the mass media should aim to:

- Promote social values and norms, civic and social responsibilities;
- Promote the acquisition or pursuit of knowledge;

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- Disseminate importantly or objectively news and opinions to encourage meaningful, articulated dialogue and discussion of issues of public interest;
- Promote the physical and social wellbeing of the people;
- Foster the spirit of self-discipline and self-sacrifice;
- Encourage the preservation and development of human values and respect for the dignity of man (p. 161).

The mass media play a central role in informing the public about social, political, economic, health, etc. issues (Rodney, 2010). They perform the necessary functions of providing information that empowers readers/listeners to action and is an alternative source people rely on for social, political, etc. information.

The use of the media to deal with specific social issues has extensively been examined. Such social vices include drug abuse, prostitution, kidnapping, excessive intake of alcohol, cigarette smoking, open defecation, and even dress habits. With these, the findings of scholars are all pointers to the fact that the media have the power to mobilize the people towards action – positive or negative (Obukoadata, 2017; Okon, 2018; Okon & Ikpi, 2019). Also, similar studies point to the fact that the media portrayal of an issue leaves such an issue in public view and can lead to certain efforts at tackling the problem or issue. The society needs the media for things to be done, for decisions to be taken, for forsaken areas to receive attention, for apathy to turn to interest, etc., and these fall within the agenda-setting role of the media.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The research questions below were raised to guide the study:

RQ1: How have the media set the prison reform agenda in South-East Nigeria?

RQ2: To what level are media audience in South-East Nigeria aware of the prison reform agenda?

RQ3: What factor(s) impinge on the efficient setting of the prison reform agenda in Nigeria by the media?

Also, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Ho¹: The media's prison agenda do not relate to audience awareness in South-East Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds expression in the Agenda-setting Theory of Mass Communication. The theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), arises as an endpoint of the 1968 study of American Presidential Election. It focuses on "how" the mass media, also to set the agenda for the campaign and on political gladiators, dictate the issues on which many people ultimately see in life.

The agenda-setting theory holds that the mass media do not just tell people what to do or think but "how" to do or think it (Baran & Davis, 2020). According to these authors, the agenda-setting function of the mass media manifests in these areas:

(a) *The vividness of Presentation*: Presented personal accounts might focus too much attention on the specific situation or individual rather than on the issue at hand.

(b) *Position of a Story*: Lead stories have an excellent agenda-setting effect. Two reasons are offered for this – first, people pay more attention to the stories at the

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beginning of the news, and second, people accept the news program’s implicit designation of a lead story as most newsworthy.

- (c) *Priming*: This is the idea that the media draw attention to some aspects of a society’s life at the expense of others. While agenda-setting reflects the impact of news coverage on the perceived importance of national issues, priming refers to the impact of news coverage on the weight assigned to specific issues in making judgments.

As depicted here, setting the agenda involves the vividness of the presentation, the position of the story, even the genre of coverage, and the priority given to the issue at the expense of others – priming. In this paper, these points are relevant in examining the extent the mass media set agenda on prison reforms in South-East Nigeria and a possible corresponding level of awareness among media audience.

Methodology

A combination of survey and content analysis was adopted as the research design for this study. For the survey, the population was all inhabitants of South-East Nigeria made up of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and the Imo States. For the media, all editions of *Daily Sun* and *The Nation* newspapers, as well as all program schedules of Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), Enugu and Africa Independent Television (AIT), Enugu station for February 2017 and February 2018 constituted the population. February was chosen because February 11 of every year is the World’s Prisons Awareness Day and the media were expected to carry many stories on prisons during this time.

Two urban and highly populated cities – Aba and Onitsha – seen as the hubs of Eastern Nigeria, were selected because virtually citizens from all the five South-East States are significantly found there due to their trading engagements. In the two towns, 60 samples were purposively allocated to each of two clusters – artisans/traders and civil/public servants, totaling 120 in each city and 240 in all.

For the content analysis, 28 issues of the two newspapers within the period of study were selected through random sampling, while 56 program schedules were also randomly selected from the two broadcast stations. The units of analysis used were the number of programs, the position of story, and the genre of coverage of the prison reform agenda.

Also, oral interviews were conducted with eight media practitioners. The interview format used was open-ended structured.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the survey, out of the 240 copies of questionnaires distributed, 220 (representing 91.7%) were validly returned and used for the study. Table 1 shows that out of 220 respondents, 42 (19%) had access to or awareness of media campaigns on prison reforms or prison-related news, while 178 (81%) had not. This implies that probably, such information was not carried in the media they were exposed to.

Table 1. Respondents’ awareness of media campaign on prison reforms

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	42	19
No	178	81
Total	220	100

From Table 2, 78% of the respondents viewed prison reform campaigns as not adequately portrayed in the media. If their opinion is anything to go by, then the media need to do more in this direction.

Table 2. Respondents’ opinion on media portrayal of prison reform agenda/campaign

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Adequately portrayed	40	18
Inadequately portrayed	172	78
Undecided	8	4
Total	220	100

Information on Table 3 is a corollary to that of Table 1. Out of 42 respondents who agreed to have access to prison reform news, 22 or 52% got theirs through interpersonal communication – a non-mass-communication type of communication.

Table 3. Respondents’ primary sources of information on prison reform/news

Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Radio	10	24
Television	5	12
Newspaper	5	12
Magazine	0	0
Billboards	0	0
Interpersonal communication	22	52
Total	42	100

Other data obtained showed that out of 56 selected program schedules of the two broadcasts, only five (or 9%) were on prison reforms for Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria(FRCN) and three (or 5%) for African Independent Television(AIT). For the extent of coverage of prison reforms by the newspapers, *Daily Sun* carried three items during the study period (or 10%) while *The Nation* had four (15%). A total of seven items were published in the two sampled newspapers – two hard news, three features, and two editorials. No report appeared in the form of pictures/cartoons.

Lastly, on placement/position of the two hard news reports on prison reforms, none was prominently placed on the front or back page in the two sampled newspapers; one appeared on a sectional page tagged, “News around the city: Crime, Court & Living,” and one in general inside page. According to Baran and Davis (2020), the position of a story depicts priority and ultimately priming of such an issue. For prison reform news, the available data prove that enough priming was not given to the issue.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are discussed in line with the formulated research questions.

RQ1: How have the media set the prison reform agenda in South-East Nigeria?

To answer this question, which is at the center of this study, a multidimensional approach was adopted. First, the opinions of respondents in Table 2 showed that the majority (78%) viewed the prison reform stories as being inadequately portrayed in the mass media.

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Secondly, a content analysis of the broadcast media showed again that only 14% of the programs within the period of study were dedicated to prison reforms even in a month set aside by the world to attract publicity to the prison. Third, analysis of the extent of coverage of the issue by two widely-read newspapers in the South-East revealed that only an item on the subject matter was present in only seven out of 28 issues of the newspapers. This again paints a picture of inadequate coverage of the issue by newspapers. Fourth, to identify the priority given to prison-related stories through priming, especially by the newspapers, it was discovered in Table 6 that none of the two hard news published appeared as the lead story on the front page. One appeared under the sectional page, while the other was given a general inside-page treatment. This infers that the media have not adequately primed the issue.

However, these findings provide enough reasons to conclude that the media have not significantly set the agenda for prison reform in Nigeria. Using all the indices of the agenda-setting function of the media, as identified by Baran and Davis (2020), we see that the media have been found wanting in all fronts. This further alludes to the position of Eze (2010) on the need to harness the media for effective and efficient prison reformation in Nigeria, given the fact that the government has not done anything substantial to address the decadence in Nigerian prisons, now cosmetically called correctional services. A concerted effort by the media to repeatedly report on prisons will “force” government out of its counter-productive stance on prison administration in Nigeria (Eze, 2010).

As has already been confirmed, the media have not set an adequate plan for prison reforms in the country. For, as explained by McCombs and Shaw (1972), setting agenda involves vivid presentation, proper positioning, and conscious prioritization of the issue at the expense of other issues. These are not the case as regards prison reforms in Nigeria. As a result, the widespread awareness that would have been created among the audience became nothing but an illusion.

RQ2: *To what level are media audiences in South-East Nigeria aware of the prison reform agenda?*

From the analysis of data in Table 1, it is clear that out of 220 respondents, only 42, representing 19%, were aware of the prison reform agenda of the media. This depicts a far too low level of awareness among the respondents. Similarly, the respondents in the majority (78%) viewed that the prison reform plan was not adequately portrayed in the media. Indeed, the portrayal level is very low, at 18%.

From the preceding, it is easily understood that the poor or inadequate portrayal of the prison reform agenda in the media largely contributed to the low level of awareness of the issue among the respondents. This further alludes to the position of Opubor (1985) that, “if any issue is not reflected in the media, for a community that depends on the media for everyday living, such issue(s) does not necessarily exist” (p.41).

A corollary to the issue of awareness of the prison reform agenda is the medium through which the respondents became aware of the issue. As seen in Table 3, out of 42 respondents that were aware of the issue, 22 or 52% of them were informed through interpersonal communication involving friends, peers, town unions, professional groups, etc. The mass media sources were indeed in the minority, and the media failed here in their agenda-setting function of not only bringing the issue to “public view” but also presenting the people with a slant of the issue to be perceived. Indeed, they have failed to

heed the admonition of Nnoli (1987) that setting agenda begets awareness and access to the issue by media audience.

RQ3: *What factor(s) impinge on the efficient setting of the prison reform agenda in Nigeria by the media?*

Some oral interviews involving eight media practitioners in South-East Nigeria provided some insights into the possible factors impinging on the media’s ability to set agenda on prison reform in Nigeria. From the responses, the factors discussed below were identified.

First, there is insufficient or no attention given by journalists to prisons as news beat. News, as widely held, is ideological, and this was found to have played out in the coverage of prisons as a beat. For many Nigerian journalists, prisons are not seen as veritable sources of marketable news. Hence attention is shifted to other “lucrative” beats. This, therefore, robs the mass media of the power of prioritizing news on prison reforms in the country.

Second, the majority of the interviewees noted that there were no editorial policy reflections on prison reformation in Nigeria. An editorial policy reflects the mission and objectives of any media outfit. Some journalists opined that most media organizations in Nigeria couch their policies to reflect such evolving issues as politics, business, or sports, thus allowing for little or no perspective on prison system reforms in Nigeria.

Third, there is the effect posed by the unwholesome “brown-envelope” syndrome existing among Nigerian reporters. It was identified that inadequate media coverage of prison reforms could be seen as one of the fallouts of this “brown-envelope” malady because some journalists, due to monetary or material considerations, focus attention on those reports that would earn them some money at the expense of many issues, such as prison reforms, that also require media attention.

Fourth, another factor related to the ones already mentioned is the dearth of newsworthy events from the prison beat in Nigeria. Some of the journalists interviewed noted that apart from a rare occurrence of a prison break, other issues on and about the prisons were hardly given priority when placed side by side with news/reports from beats such as politics, business, sports, economy, etc.

It was generally accepted that these and more issues need to be vigorously tackled if the media were to effectively, efficiently, and successfully pursue the ongoing reform agenda for the Nigerian prison system.

Hypothesis Testing

The formulated hypothesis, presented in a null form, is as follows:

Ho¹: The media’s prison agenda do not relate to audience awareness in South-East Nigeria.

The chi-square goodness of fit formula adopted is $X^2 = \sum \frac{(Fo - Fe)^2}{Fe}$

Where: Fo = Observed Frequency
Fe = Expected Frequency

Table 4. Chi-square test of hypothesis

Category	Fo	Fe	O – E	(O – E) ²	$\frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$
Yes	171	73.3	97.7	9545.29	130.2222
No	49	73.3	33.3	1108.89	15.12810
Total	220				201.7553

Calculated value	=	201.7553
Significance	=	0.05
Degree of freedom	=	2
Critical value at 2 degrees of freedom	=	5.991

From the values shown in the testing table above, the calculated value is greater than the critical value; hence the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate upheld. This indicates that the prison reform agenda set by the mass media is related to the awareness of the audience in South-East Nigeria. In other words, the inadequate coverage of the prison reform or prison-related stories in the media translated into a low level of awareness among the South-East Nigerian audience. The test confirms that the media are a “force” in the social change; and further re-echoes the position of Lazardfield (1984) that “the media by their mention of people or issues, confer importance in the public eyes” (p. 95). However, in this case, the media have not reported adequately on the prison reforms and, therefore, have not conferred “importance” on the issue, hence the low-level awareness of the issue among members of the Nigerian public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the data collected, presented, and analyzed, together with the findings, we conclude that the media’s role as social mobilizers should be reinforced in ensuring significant prison reforms in Nigeria. The potentials of the media in creating awareness and leading the people to accept or act in a way often favorable to the message should, therefore, be tapped and applied in reforming the Nigerian prison system. This is an area that has been neglected by successive governments. Several attempts and promises have been made, but the situation has been more of rhetoric than action. The media, as opined by Eze (2010), should therefore be used to “force” government and other agencies into taking concerted action towards the effective and sustainable reformation of the country’s prison system. Following the conclusion made, it is recommended that:

- (i) Journalists and reporters, in particular, should be sensitized by civil society organizations on the need to adequately portray the prison reforms in the mass media.
- (ii) The mass media should stand up to their role as the “fourth estate of the realm” in the Nigerian society so that they can, most importantly, pursue and set appropriate agenda on prison reforms for both the government and the governed.
- (iii) Actions should consciously be taken to popularize the World Prison Awareness Day held globally on February 11 every year so that the level of awareness on the ongoing prison reforms in Nigeria, which is very low at present even among journalists, can be increased.

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